

THE 1968 TET OFFENSIVE AND THE IRAQ INSURGENCY:
EXAMINING THE ROLE OF INTELLIGENCE

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ABSTRACT

THE 1968 TET OFFENSIVE AND THE IRAQ INSURGENCY: EXAMINING THE ROLE OF INTELLIGENCE, by Major C. Renald Johnson, 71 pages.

The role of intelligence is one of the most challenging and critical components of conflict. In modern conflict the knowledge of an opponent is often the difference between success and failure. This thesis examines the relationship between two significant events: The 1968 Tet Offensive and the Insurgency in Iraq in 2004. This thesis examines the intelligence resources available, the capabilities, and the impact of external influences.

By comparing these two events, this thesis will identify common factors associated with the failure to provide adequate warning to senior military and civilian leaders.

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ACRONYMS

CFLCC	Combined Component Land Forces Command
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CICV	Combined Intelligence Center Vietnam
MACV	Military Advisory Command Vietnam
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
RVNAF	Republic of Vietnam Air Force
VC	Viet Cong
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

One of the most salient responsibilities of intelligence practitioners is discerning the actual capabilities and intentions of an adversary. Capability and intent are the core components of predicting an adversary's course of action. These predictions serve as the foundation of strategic, operational, and tactical decisions. Without an accurate understanding of an adversary's desired end-state and the means he possesses to achieve it, policy makers and military leaders often develop a false perception of an adversary.

The recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have underscored the necessity for leaders to base decisions upon accurate assessments of the current situation. Each conflict is unique, and the dynamic and fluid nature of an insurgency often negates many of the advantages previous counterinsurgency experience affords. This fact exemplifies the need for predictive assessments to be based exclusively on contemporary analysis, free from the biases of previous experiences or the desired outcome of policy makers. When failures occur, often the bulk of the responsibility is placed on inadequate or incorrect intelligence. While intelligence is often imperfect, it is important to recognize other key factors that are present when significant failures occur. It is necessary to understand the elements that comprise the context in which the failures occur.

Proposed Research Question: Were there common factors associated with the failure to anticipate the 1968 Tet Offensive and the 2004 Iraqi Uprising?

Qualifications: As an Army officer who has served as both an infantry officer in Iraq and a military intelligence officer in Afghanistan, I had the unique opportunity to see a counterinsurgency from a multitude of perspectives. Personal experience has shown me

the importance of accurate assessments and the consequences paid for inaccurate assessments. I understand the challenges faced by both the consumption and the production aspects of intelligence. As a rifle platoon leader in Iraq in 2004, I witnessed firsthand the impact of the 2004 Uprising. In Afghanistan, I was an intelligence officer on brigade staff and experienced both success and failure through our attempts to gain an accurate understanding of the insurgency.

Background

The popular perception of both the Tet Offensive and the 2004 Iraq uprising is that they caught both military and civilian intelligence agencies by surprise. Though separated by space and time, both events share common characteristics. In each instance, the perception of capability and intent of insurgent forces were grossly inaccurate. Arguably, this miscalculation was not necessarily due to a lack of collection or faulty analysis. Rather, the current intelligence available to decision makers in 1968 and 2004 presented a contradictory view of policymaker's perceptions, and was therefore overlooked.

In Iraq in 2004, the budding insurgency was mischaracterized as a disorganized group of disenfranchised Sunnis and the remnants of Saddam Hussein's Army.¹ The failure to acknowledge the existence of an insurgency was compounded by the lack of appreciation for the capabilities the insurgents possessed. While intelligence reports indicated an expansion of anti-US sentiment and increased hostile activities, the focus

¹ Ann Scott Tyson, "Insurgents in Iraq Show Signs of Acting as Network," *Christian Science Monitor*, 28 April 2004, accessed 15 August 2014, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0428/p03s01-usmi.html>.

remained on proceeding with the original course of action. The undeniable proof of an active and capable insurgency came in the form of a countrywide offensive that paralyzed the reconstruction process and the transition from the Coalition Provisional Authority to an Iraqi-led government.² The long-term cost of failing to fully appreciate the situation is still being calculated.

The 1968 Tet Offensive has been the subject of significant study and debate. Much of the effort has been directed at attempting to understand the conditions that led to the level of unpreparedness that existed prior to the offensive. While the conditions during the Tet offensive differ greatly from those the United States faced in Iraq in 2004, the two events share the characteristic of being characterized as failures to successfully anticipate events that, in retrospect, should have been apparent.

After almost three years of escalation, the message most commonly conveyed to the American people was that the Viet Cong (VC) and North Vietnamese Army forces were almost beaten.³ Military and civilian leaders were claiming that the significant attrition suffered by the Communists in South Vietnam left them with significantly degraded capabilities. In spite of numerous reports indicating the Communists were planning a significant offensive, few if any preparations were made prior to January 30, 1968, providing the Communist forces with the element of surprise.

² James A. Russell, "Strategic Implications of the Iraq Insurgency," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 8, no. 2 (June 2004): 48-55.

³ Chester J. Pach, "The War on Television: TV News, The Johnson Administration, and Vietnam," in *A Companion to the Vietnam War*, ed. Marilyn B. Young and Robert Buzzanco (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 459.

By definition, a surprise attack is the failure of intelligence systems to provide adequate warning. History provides us with nearly limitless examples of events in which forewarning through accurate intelligence could have significantly altered the outcome. The September 11th attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the attack on Pearl Harbor by Japan, and Saddam Hussein's army crossing into Kuwait in 1991 are a few of the many events in which prior warning may have led to a distinctly different conclusion. Surprise is defined by Richard Betts in *Surprise Attack* as, "the degree that the victim does not appreciate whether, when, where or how the adversary will strike."⁴ However, warning alone will not prevent surprise. Warning is simply information. In order to prevent surprise, action is required. Betts describes the linkage between warning and response as "evaluation and judgment" as the reason most fall victim to surprise.⁵

This thesis will look at two of the most significant failures to provide strategic warning in the last 50 years, the 1968 Tet Offensive and the 2004 Iraqi Uprising, by attempting to identify common factors. It is much easier to conduct the forensic analysis with the accurate knowledge of what actually occurred, as opposed to predictive analysis in which limitless possibilities exist. The reverse engineering of an event will certainly highlight data points that were present throughout the process. Events that appeared irrelevant leading up to an unexpected occurrence will become more obvious. It is also important to note that identifying these key events is one of the primary purposes of intelligence systems. Intelligence organizations exist exclusively to provide policy

⁴ Richard K. Betts, *Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute, 1983), 4-5.

⁵ Ibid., 87.

makers and military leaders with the information they require to make complex decisions.⁶

Primary Research Question

What, if any, common factors were present prior to the 1968 Tet Offensive and the 2004 Iraq uprising that prevented the US from successfully anticipating a large-scale enemy offensive?

Secondary Research Questions

1. What information was available to policy makers and military leaders prior to the 1968 Tet Offensive and the 2004 Iraqi Uprising?
2. What were the perceptions regarding the capability and intent on the insurgencies in Viet Nam and Iraq?
3. What indicators of a large-scale offensive were present prior to the 1968 Tet offensive and the 2004 Iraq Uprising?
4. What factors prevented policy makers and military leaders from accepting contemporary intelligence efforts?
5. What were the conflicting assessments within the intelligence enterprise, and why were they not radically divergent?

⁶ Amanda J.Gookins, "The Role of Intelligence in Policy Making," *The SAIS Review of International Affairs* 28, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 65-73.

CHAPTER 2

TET OFFENSIVE

The MACV Component of the Tet Intelligence Failure

Much effort has been expended on the discussion of whether or not indicators existed prior to the Tet Offensive. James J. Wirtz, in his authoritative work *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War*, states “U.S. and South Vietnamese officers and intelligence analysts failed to anticipate the nature of the Tet offensive.”⁷ This is a claim that remains difficult to dispute. Certainly, if a unified and comprehensive intelligence assessment that was shared and agreed upon by the multitude of intelligence agencies supporting the US efforts in South Vietnam and was adequately disseminated to the necessary policy makers and military leaders, it could have possibly changed the outcome of the Tet Offensive. This begs the question, what was occurring within the intelligence enterprise that led to the failure of an accurate assessment?

In order to fully understand the source and nature of the failure, it is important to examine the intelligence structures and processes that were in place during the period leading up to the Tet Offensive. Additionally, what was the capability to collect information and analyze that information? Finally, who were the individuals that played key roles in the process? Each of these components composes a critical role in the effectiveness of the intelligence organizations the United States depended upon to help them prosecute the war. It is important to examine the status of each of these components

⁷ James J. Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 1.

from the beginning, up to the point that the communist forces initiated the Tet Offensive. At which point, the advantage of foreknowledge was negated.

Evolution of the Military Advisory Command Vietnam from 1965 to 1968

The first area of analysis is the intelligence structure that was in place at the beginning of the United States build-up in the years leading up to the Tet Offensive, specifically 1965 to late 1967. The evolution of the Military Advisory Command Vietnam (MACV) structure is an important aspect in the analysis of the intelligence effort shortcomings in relation to the Tet Offensive, because it is the framework in which all of the processes are brought together and integrated into the decision-making. The product of an effective intelligence organization is an assessment that has been analyzed, synthesized and disseminated that satisfies the necessary intelligence requirements. Without the adequate capacity to perform all the necessary functions, an intelligence organization will rarely meet the needs of military and civilian leaders.

During the period prior to the Tet Offensive, there were numerous intelligence organizations with varying levels of involvement at work in Southeast Asia.⁸ However, the organization that plays the central role in any failures or successes associated with the 1968 Tet Offensive is the MACV. The MACV, as the intelligence staff of the Commander of the US Forces Vietnam, was responsible for generating and synchronizing information and facilitating the flow between MACV's subordinate units, Pacific

⁸ C. Michael Hiam, *A Monument to Deceit: Sam Adams and the Vietnam Intelligence Wars* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2006), 107.

Command, and in certain instances, the senior civilian and military leadership in Washington, DC.⁹

It is important to recognize that the structure of MACV was relatively dynamic during the two-year period leading up to the Tet Offensive. During the initial stages of US involvement, the United States was in a primarily advisory and support role with the responsibility of coordinating with and providing quality control for South Vietnamese intelligence apparatus.¹⁰ Until July 1965, the United States military personnel did not have the personnel, equipment, or facilities to effectively take the lead in the execution of intelligence processes or in providing the necessary intelligence support to the United States military forces in an expanded capacity in South Vietnam.¹¹

The catalyst for the increase in capacity of the MACV was the decision by senior officials of the United States government to assume the lead role in combating the Communist forces operating in South Vietnam.¹² This meant the employment of significant combat forces required to shore up the efforts of the Army Republic of South Vietnam in order to counter the advance of Communist forces. However, as combat

⁹ Major General Joseph A. McChristian, *The Role of Military Intelligence 1965-1967* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1994), 12.

¹⁰ William G. Benedict, Douglas C. Dillard, Richard E. Evers, and Leonard A. Spirito, "A Critical Analysis of US Army Intelligence Organizations and Concepts in Vietnam, 1965-1969" (Group Study Project, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 1971), 18.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹² McChristian, *The Role of Military Intelligence 1965-1967*, 4.

forces in the form of infantry battalions, brigades, and divisions streamed into South Vietnam, the corresponding intelligence effort grew at a very different rate.¹³

In the context of the United States' involvement in South Vietnam, the mission of the J-2 paralleled the role of MACV. In addition to the primary function of providing support to the South Vietnamese, the MACV served as the forward element of the intelligence organization and produced information and assessments that flowed from South Vietnam to external intelligence agencies, commands, and senior officials in Washington, DC.¹⁴ However, because of the limited scope of MACV's responsibilities, there was little reason to task the limited intelligence collection platforms and resources required to undertake the necessary collection operations to meet the additional requirements that are needed to conduct a large counter insurgency operation. It is also important to note that there were occasional technical collection assets tasked to support operations in North and South Vietnam in the form of imagery and signal intelligence. However, this was only on a limited basis and often associated with providing support to the strategic bombing effort.¹⁵

Further complicating matters, when intelligence collection resources were allocated to a MACV collection requirement, the intelligence personnel on site often lacked the particular skills necessary to conduct exploitation or analysis of the

¹³ Ibid., 2.

¹⁴ Ronnie E. Ford, *Tet 1968: Understanding the Surprise* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass and Company, 1995), 164.

¹⁵ Benedict, Dillard, Evers, and Spirito, "A Critical Analysis of US Army Intelligence Organizations and Concepts in Vietnam, 1965-1969," 19.

information.¹⁶ The technical nature of signal, imagery, radar, and infrared collection required specific training to effectively interpret and analyze the raw information and these skills were not present in the required quantities within the MACV.¹⁷ Because of its limited collection and analytical capacity, the ability to respond to internally generated intelligence requirements was greatly reduced.¹⁸

This situation presented a multifaceted problem for intelligence practitioners within the MACV before 1965.¹⁹ The value of information is directly related to the timeliness in which it is received and analyzed. Without a responsive collection program and the ability to conduct rapid analysis, it is very difficult to develop an accurate assessment of the enemy. Therefore, assessments were likely to be the product of the South Vietnamese intelligence organizations.

As a result, the majority of intelligence available on enemy forces was limited to information passed from the South Vietnamese and reports obtained from US forces operating under the control of MACV, such as United States Army Special Forces units that directly partnered with South Vietnamese military units.²⁰ While it is certain that

¹⁶ Ibid., 20.

¹⁷ Ibid., 27.

¹⁸ Benedict, Dillard, Evers, and Spirito, "A Critical Analysis of US Army Intelligence Organizations and Concepts in Vietnam, 1965-1969," 19.

¹⁹ McChristian, *The Role of Military Intelligence 1965-1967*, 3.

²⁰ Benedict, Dillard, Evers, and Spirito, "A Critical Analysis of US Army Intelligence Organizations and Concepts in Vietnam, 1965-1969," 19.

valuable information was received in this manner, the ability to generate a comprehensive intelligence estimate would have been significantly limited.²¹

As the role of the United States began to grow in South Vietnam, so did the role of the MACV. The transition was from a primarily advisory role to one of providing the necessary intelligence support for the strategic, operational and tactical employment of United States combat forces and by informing the strategic decisions of senior policy makers and military leaders.²²

The Architect of the Transition

The initial and possibly one of the most critical steps taken in the transition of the MACV intelligence effort was the appointment of Brigadier General J.A. McChristian as the Assistant Chief of Staff J-2. General McChristian was an experienced intelligence officer with prior experience in counterinsurgency in Greece, as well as significant experience in conventional conflict during both World War II and the Korean War.²³ Also, as the previous G-2 for Pacific Command, he was familiar with the situation in South Vietnam.²⁴

In describing the initial stages of the development of the organization that became a central entity in the events that unfolded two years later, General McChristian states:

²¹ Ibid.

²² Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 2006), 284.

²³ McChristian, *The Role of Military Intelligence 1965-1967*, iv.

²⁴ Ibid.

I worked with others to develop for Mr. McNamara a ‘shopping list’ of intelligence resources required. I learned early that we were starting our planning from scratch. No plans or planning guidance concerning the transition from an advisory organization to a combat organization existed within the J-2 staff.²⁵

General McChristian’s remarks suggest that the transition from a supporting role to a lead role was made with the lack of a comprehensive plan that was needed to create the type of organization with the ability to meet the vast requirements across the spectrum of military and civilian leaders. The fact that the Secretary of Defense was personally involved in the process of identifying resources for the new organization should have been an indication of the level of support available to the new enterprise. However, the commitment of resources is only as effective as the availability, and the availability of resources became an issue.

Development from 1965 to 1967

Several aspects of the development proved to be problematic for the MACV over the next two years as it grew in its new role. An area that continued to prove problematic in building the new organization was the availability of trained and experienced intelligence analysts and operators. It is also important to realize that formal classroom education and the actual practice of intelligence under combat conditions in an active theater of war are vastly different. Therefore, the personnel problem is essentially two-fold. Intelligence practitioners must be trained in the technical aspects of their trade, and then develop the necessary experience in the field to become fully operational intelligence professionals that provide a commander with valuable information.

²⁵ Ibid., 5.

As quoted in the Critical Analysis of US Army Intelligence Organizations and Concepts in Vietnam, 1965 to 1969, from an interview with General McChristian:

One of the major shortcomings from the beginning was when the requirements for intelligence personnel resources were set forth in the force structure, the units and people were not available in the force structure of the US Army because our contingency plans call for intelligence to be mobilized from reserves.²⁶

The need for intelligence practitioners to be quickly reallocated from organizations across the US Army to South Vietnam occurred in an environment where there were no excess intelligence personnel to flex into the growing theater. Cold War requirements in Europe and elsewhere meant that in order to flex personnel to one location, another theater would have to do without. At a time when large continental armies faced each other on the plains of Europe, commanders outside of Vietnam were reluctant to voluntarily reduce the number of intelligence personnel supporting their respective efforts.

Additionally, following the post-Korean Conflict draw down, the intelligence assets within the US Army were greatly diminished.²⁷ As a result, the MACV took almost two years to reach its full operational capacity. Even with support from the highest levels of the United States government, certain processes could only advance at the rate an individual soldier can be trained and develop the necessary experience to function at the required capacity.²⁸

²⁶ MG Joseph A. McChristian, Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, US Army, Fort Meade, Maryland, 22 September 1970, quoted in William G. Benedict, Douglas C. Dillard, Richard E. Evers, and Leonard A. Spirito, "A Critical Analysis of US Army Intelligence Organizations and Concepts in Vietnam, 1965–1969" (Group Study Project, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 1971), 27.

²⁷ McChristian, *The Role of Military Intelligence 1965-1967*, 11.

²⁸ Ibid.

The delay of the MACV in becoming fully operational becomes problematic in various ways. The most immediate impact is the limited capacity to provide operational units and senior civilian and military leadership with the required intelligence support. The long-term effect is the degraded organizational level experience. Certainly, individuals were gaining competence in their specific areas, but the overall competence of the organization was degraded until it operated at full capacity.

General McChristian initiated the first of several reorganizations that occurred between 1965 and the beginning of the Tet Offensive. He oversaw the creation of analytical centers that focused on specific areas of information sources.²⁹ At the center of the new intelligence architecture was the Combined Intelligence Center Vietnam (CICV).³⁰ By design, the CICV served as the nucleus to bring the multitude of collection and analytical centers together into a cohesive intelligence effort capable of providing the necessary support to both the commander of MACV and the operational units in the field.³¹

The organizational capacity can be measured by MACV's ability to bring a multitude of information together into a cohesive effort capable of providing the most accurate picture of the enemy forces given the available information. As the amount of

²⁹ Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation*, 284.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Benedict, Dillard, Evers, and Spirito, "A Critical Analysis of US Army Intelligence Organizations and Concepts in Vietnam, 1965-1969," 31.

combat forces in South Vietnam grew and the collection assets available for tasking increased, the volume of information that required processing and analysis also grew.³²

General McChristian further described the challenges of managing the vast amount of information that flowed through MACV and at the same time creating an accurate estimate of the enemy forces:

People who have not worked in intelligence normally have no conception of the number of people it takes to perform necessary activities. Without an extensive database that can be manipulated rapidly, it is very difficult to evaluate information and to identify and ferret out guerrillas and members of the Vietnamese Communist political-military infrastructure. Every scrap of information, every written report, is to the intelligence officer as nickels and dimes are to a banker. It takes a lot of them to make the business profitable. Every piece of information must be accounted for like money and confirmed or refuted as genuine or counterfeit.³³

As General McChristian pointed out, an intelligence organization must perform well in its entirety. The impact of having partially manned staff sections or sections of the organization being staffed with untrained or partially trained individuals, who lack the necessary training or experience, has the effect of degrading the overall effectiveness of the organization. Without an intelligence staff that understands the environment, the accounting of the “nickels and dimes” is very difficult.

Furthermore, General McChristian characterized the eventual fate of both the MACV and to some length, the eventual outcome of the United States effort in South Vietnam:

³² Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation*, 284.

³³ McChristian, *The Role of Military Intelligence 1965-1967*, 9.

History records that in time of war the tendency of the U.S. government is to provide the man on the battlefield the resources he needs. The record also reveals repeatedly the sad story of too little too late because we were not prepared.³⁴

The intelligence organization developed over the two years preceding the Tet Offensive generated an organization that was extremely capable in the processing of raw data and generating detailed information on the composition, disposition and strength of the communist forces operating in both North and South Vietnam. Despite the multitude of challenges experienced during the process of building up the CICV, when it was complete, it provided one of the most robust and capable intelligence organizations ever developed to support a combat operation.³⁵ Figure 1 shows the organization of the CICV as it existed in May of 1967. Eventually, the CICV had over 500 US intelligence personnel working in a state of the art facility operating 24 hours a day year round in order to satisfy the intelligence requirements of MACV.³⁶ In addition to the CICV, it is also important to look at the broader intelligence structure the CICV was a part of. In figure 2, the larger organization of the J-2 staff is depicted, with the J-2 occupying a position under the Deputy J-2 Production.

³⁴ Ibid., 11.

³⁵ Appendix B to Memorandum in Support of Defendant CBS' Motion to Dismiss and for Summary Judgment, 23 May 1984, Folder 4, Box 2, Larry Berman Collection (Westmoreland v. CBS), The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Record Number B35239, accessed 18 June 2014, <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=0250204001>.

³⁶ McChristian, *The Role of Military Intelligence 1965-1967*, 21.

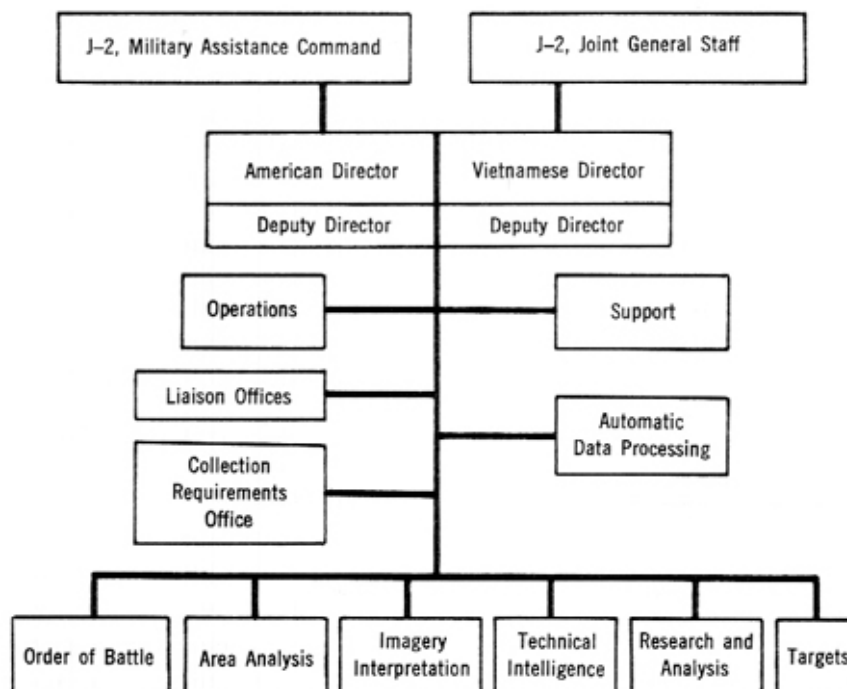


Figure 1. Staff Organization for The Combined Intelligence Center Vietnam

Source: Major General Joseph A. McChristian, *The Role of Military Intelligence 1965-1967* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1994), 48.

CHART 3—ASSISTANT CHIEF OF STAFF, J-2, STAFF ORGANIZATION, MAY 1967

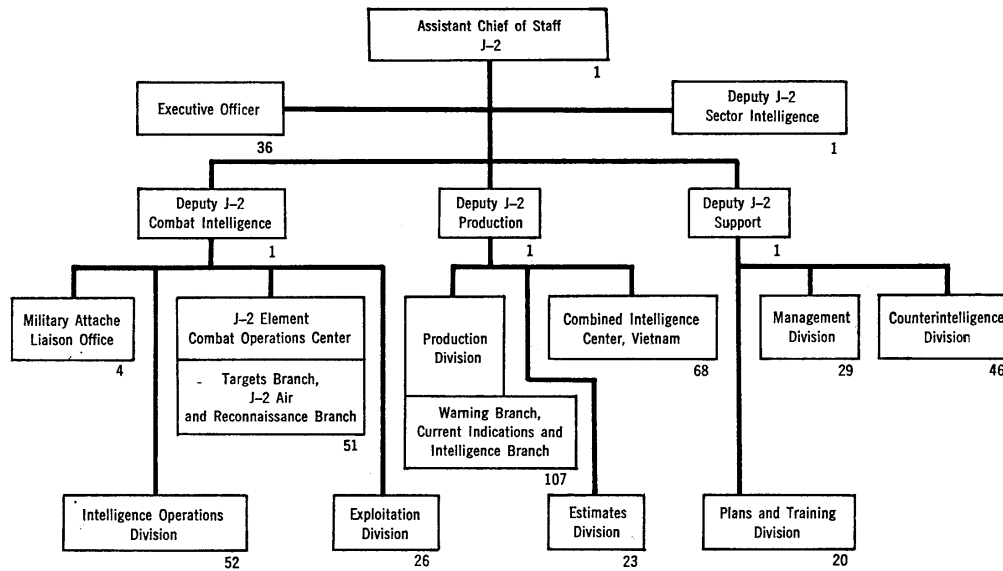


Figure 2. Assistant Chief Of Staff, J-2, Staff Organization, May 1967

Source: Major General Joseph A. McChristian, *The Role of Military Intelligence 1965-1967* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1994), 17.

Along with the organizational growth, MACV's capacity to process raw data grew at a significant rate. One of the most challenging areas of combating an insurgency is discerning the personnel involved in an insurgency as opposed to the general civilian population. CICV addressed this problem through large IBM worksheets that formed a database of personalities associated with enemy forces. Depicted in figure 3, the information in the database grew from 47 personnel in December of 1966 to 5507 in April of 1967.³⁷ Figure 3 also depicts the growth of names on hand. The personalities the CICV tracked grew from 2100 to 14400 from the period November 1966 to April 1967. These figures demonstrate not only the progress MACV was making in regard to

³⁷ McChristian, *The Role of Military Intelligence 1965-1967*, 75.

understanding the individuals associated with the VC, but also the organization's growing understanding of the scope of the enemy forces.

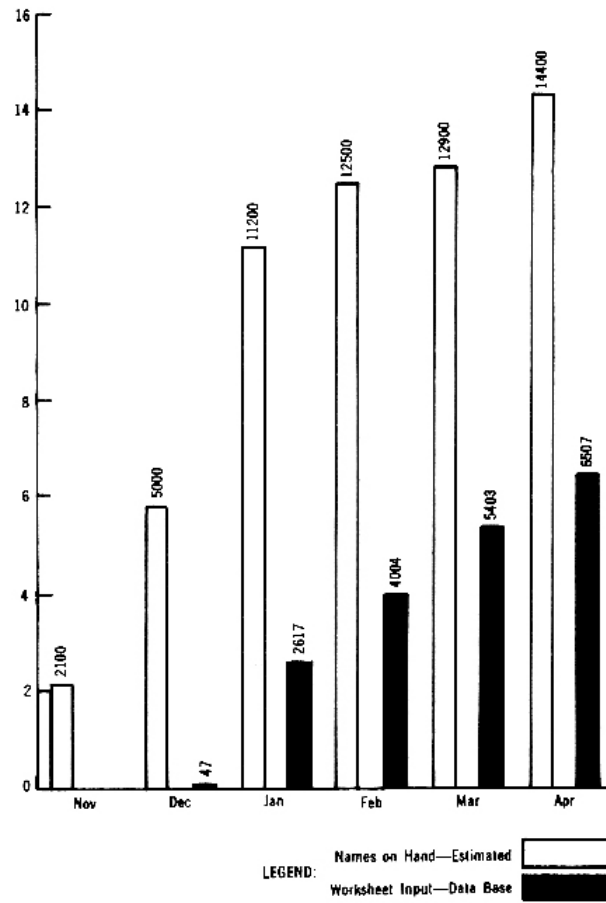


Figure 3. Data Base Input, (CICV)

Source: Major General Joseph A. McChristian, *The Role of Military Intelligence 1965-1967* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1994), 75.

The Order of Battle

Within this period of growth and change, one particular requirement became the central effort of the MACV and the intelligence community involved in the Vietnamese

conflict. Before 1965, the knowledge US forces had of the communist order of battle was gleaned from liaison activities with Republic of Vietnam Air Force.³⁸ One US officer and two enlisted personnel were the only linkage between Commander US Military Assistance Command Vietnam and the communist order of battle.³⁹

In July 1965, MACV was unable to provide a coherent and valid estimate of the Communist's forces order of battle.⁴⁰ Over the following two years, the estimate became the central focus of the MACV. Starting as a staff of three, by 1967 the order of battle staff grew incrementally into a robust fusion center.⁴¹ Starting with augmented staff from the US Army Pacific Command G2 to the arrival of the 319th Military intelligence detachment, MACV's capability grew.⁴² The culmination of the enhanced capability became the Order of Battle Branch within the CICV (Combined Intelligence Center Vietnam).⁴³

Because captured enemy documents and interrogations were one of the most critical sources of information, two of the most significant components of the CICV were the Combined Military Interrogation Center and the Combined Document Exploitation

³⁸ Benedict, Dillard, Evers, and Spirito, "A Critical Analysis of US Army Intelligence Organizations and Concepts in Vietnam, 1965-1969," 44.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ McChristian, 4.

⁴¹ Benedict, Dillard, Evers, and Spirito, "A Critical Analysis of US Army Intelligence Organizations and Concepts in Vietnam, 1965-1969," 44.

⁴² Ibid., 45.

⁴³ Ibid.

Center.⁴⁴ While signals intelligence collection capability was available to MACV, the challenge was in the classification. Signals intelligence is generally classified, as Not Releasable to Foreign Nationals could not be shared with the South Vietnamese. Since the Order of Battle was developed at the CICV at MACV headquarters, the information with the Not Releasable to Foreign Nationals caveat could not be displayed and shared with allied partners.⁴⁵

To overcome this challenge, the order of battle team was split into two groups, one located in South Vietnam within the CICV, and another outside of South Vietnam. In theory this system should allow for the incorporation of signals intelligence into the assessment; however it instead created more conflict because of the inability to reconcile the differing assessments of the enemy order of battle without acknowledging that the United States was withholding information from its partners in South Vietnam.⁴⁶

Each month, the CICV issued an order of battle summary, which was disseminated throughout MACV and to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Defense Intelligence Agency, and Department of Defense. The information was kept on cards controlled by the CIA. From this network of disseminated estimates, larger estimates and intelligence studies were created. The implication is that the information used to generate

⁴⁴ Deposition-William Colby (1-146), 29 March 1984, Folder 16, Box 6, Larry Berman Collection (Westmoreland v. CBS), The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Record Number 56102, accessed 10 November 2014, <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=0250616001>.

⁴⁵ Benedict, Dillard, Evers, and Spirito, "A Critical Analysis of US Army Intelligence Organizations and Concepts in Vietnam, 1965-1969," 47.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 48.

the larger strategic picture was a product derived from the MACV Order of Battle Detachments.

Within the overall communist order of battle, MACV identified two areas of significant weakness that were to prove pivotal in relation to the Tet Offensive, the Political Order of Battle and the Guerilla Order of Battle. According to General McChristian, despite the huge advances the MACV made over the preceding year, the resources were not available to collect against these critical areas until late 1966. Codenamed Ritz (Political OB) and Corral (Guerilla OB), the estimates were not complete until May of 1967.⁴⁷

The Order of Battle produced by the MACV provided the best picture of enemy forces that was available to both military and civilian leaders. However, it is important to note that the process of identifying the many types of communist forces was still very new. Given the complexity and scope of the intelligence mission, particularly the Ritz and Corral programs, the processes, and methods evolved and required refinement. The most obvious impact to this evolution was the fluctuation of the numbers reported in the Order of Battle summary.

The first major change came in June of 1967. Despite evidence of higher numbers of communist forces in May of 1967, the conservative nature of the criteria needed to

⁴⁷ Document Reference Number: B432, Memorandum submitted by Major General McChristian, 21 May 1967, *Strength of VC Irregular Forces*, in Appendix B to Memorandum in Support of Defendant CBS' Motion to Dismiss and for Summary Judgment, 23 May 1984, Folder 4, Box 2, Larry Berman Collection (Westmoreland v. CBS), The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Record Number B35239, accessed 18 June 2014, <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=0250204001>.

modify the Order of Battle prevented immediate acceptance.⁴⁸ In order for an enemy unit to be officially listed in the Order of Battle, it required two separate sources and required approval from General McChristian himself. Therefore, any significant change in the numbers of enemy personnel required the direct involvement of General McChristian.

From July of 1965 to the months leading up to the Tet Offensive, the MACV had grown from a handful of personnel into the organization that played the central role in the estimates that shaped national policy. Considering the relatively short period of two years, the intelligence efforts of the US forces in Vietnam significantly matured from an understaffed advisory element that depended upon shared information from partners and scraps of collection gleaned from the limited technical collection assets collecting on MACV requirements, into a fully functional intelligence organization.

As previously discussed, while the MACV experienced significant growth in both size and capability, the information disseminated regarding the enemy Order of Battle was a recent development.⁴⁹ James Wirtz, the author of *Tet: Intelligence Failure in War* takes a comprehensive approach in his analysis of the Tet intelligence failure. In order to analyze the shortcomings in the intelligence process, Wirtz categorizes the intelligence tasks into four areas: collection, analysis, response, and dissemination. Beginning with

⁴⁸ Court Proceedings-Joseph A. McChristian (8982-9141), 6 February 1985, Folder 12, Box 5, Larry Berman Collection (Westmoreland v. CBS), The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, accessed 19 August 2014, <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=0250512001>.

⁴⁹ Document Reference Number: B432, Memorandum submitted by Major General McChristian, 21 May 1967, *Strength of VC Irregular Forces*, in Appendix B to Memorandum in Support of Defendant CBS' Motion to Dismiss and for Summary Judgment, 23 May 1984, Folder 4, Box 2, Larry Berman Collection (Westmoreland v. CBS), The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. accessed 18 June 2014, <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=0250204001>.

collection, Wirtz concluded that sufficient information was available for analysts to discern both the intent and capability of the communist forces.⁵⁰ Robust signals intelligence collection, captured enemy documents, and the interrogation of prisoners each provided a piece of the puzzle that, when viewed in the proper context, provided the clues necessary for intelligence analysts to accurately predict the communist intentions.⁵¹

The second area, analysis, received much worse marks. Wirtz points out that accuracy is not necessarily the greatest failing of the analytical effort, rather timeliness and consensus.⁵² Analyses failed in timeliness, because emphatic warnings were not received until a relatively short time before the offensive commenced. As previously discussed, many of the components required for effective analysis were only recently becoming fully functional and updated enemy estimates were being distributed that not only departed from previous assessments, but left little time for reaction. For example, General Westmoreland received reports in January warning of imminent attacks by communist forces, leaving precious little time for United States and Army Republic of South Vietnam forces to prepare.⁵³

The ongoing situation at Khe Sahn presented an additional issue for General Westmoreland in dealing with the intelligence reports.⁵⁴ The siege at Khe Sahn was

⁵⁰ James J. Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 256.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 258.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 259.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Lieutenant General Willard Pearson, *Vietnam Studies: The War in the Northern Provinces 1966-1968*, 1 January 1975, Folder 6, Box 1, Ralph Reinhart Collection, The

developing into a situation similar to what the French faced at Dien Bien Phu.⁵⁵ Given the multitude of events occurring simultaneously, General Westmoreland was faced with an increasingly difficult task. Competing intelligence estimates presented leaders with a difficult situation. On one hand, the real threat of Khe Sahn being overrun and on the other a large-scale offensive that could occur anywhere along the coastal region of the country. This presented few favorable options for General Westmoreland about when and where to apply his forces without assuming significant risk.

The CIA presented pre-offensive analysis that addressed the Communist intent, specifically the desire to create an uprising amongst the South Vietnamese. Again, this estimate represented a challenge to MACV in that it presented two very divergent course of action the enemy forces may take. The report describes the information available regarding the political objectives of the Communists as “ambiguous” and “contradictory” and did not provide an accurate guide in determining future enemy courses of action.⁵⁶

The Defense Intelligence Agency conducted their own forensic examination of the information provided to the Joint Chiefs of Staff before the Tet Offensive.⁵⁷ If the aforementioned document is accurate, not only did the US and its allies have accurate

Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, accessed 30 November 2014, <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=16180106002>, 29.

⁵⁵ Eric Hammel, *Khe Sanh: Siege in the Clouds, an Oral History* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1989), 292.

⁵⁶ *The Intelligence Background of the Current Communist Offensive*, Intelligence Report, 15 February 1968, National Security Agency: Organization and Operations, 1945-2009, Digital National Security Archive, accessed 9 June 2014, http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnas&rft_dat=xri:dnas:article:CHN01592.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

information regarding the upcoming offensive with relatively accurate details, but that it had been available for some time. This leads to the third intelligence task identified by Wirtz, the dissemination of the assessment to the appropriate parties in order to provide advance warning of a pending enemy action.

From the MACV perspective, General McChristian was struggling with the new estimate. In his court deposition in *CBS vs. Westmoreland*, General McChristian described delivering his new finding to the Commander of the MACV:

At long last, we finally had adequate resources and sufficient control of the countryside to collect this information. My cable was to report the first results which, in my judgment, I could defend. I could have sent the cable without presenting it to General Westmoreland. However, in this case, I considered it prudent because of the large increase in our updated figures, and in order to let the commander know that we were at last making significant progress in identifying our enemy in more detail. These were enemy forces who were adversely affecting the accomplishment of our mission. Now our estimates of enemy capabilities would take these new figures into account. To the best of my recollection, the cable estimated political Order of Battle at 88,000 and the Irregulars at 198,000.

I presented the cable to General Westmoreland about 7 p.m. We were alone in his office. He was seated at his desk. I expected him to be pleased "with our progress. I was surprised by his reaction. He read the cable, looked at me and said: "If I send this cable to Washington it will create a political bombshell." I offered to take to Washington and to explain it to the appropriate personnel.⁵⁸

General McChristian chose to deliver this information in person. The General understood the impact that the newest assessments would have. General McChristian also understood, perhaps better than anyone, the information he was delivering to General

⁵⁸ General William C. Westmoreland's Memorandum of Law in Opposition to Defendant CBS's Motion to Dismiss and For Summary Judgment, 20 July 1984, Folder 35, Box 12, Glenn Helm Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Record Number 284412, accessed 30 November 2014, <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=1071235001,61,441>.

Westmoreland was perhaps the most accurate estimate of the enemy forces that had been available to the US and allied forces.

Certainly, if the intelligence analysts at MACV and the CIA had provided civilian and military leaders with definitive proof of an upcoming offensive, the outcome may have been different. To properly understand the MACV reaction to the available intelligence, it is imperative to understand what information was disseminated before the commencement of the offensive. Certainly, information existed that provided an indicator of significant activity. However, how is the information available to analysts different from information that was received routinely through the collection process?

There was information indicating the communist forces were planning an offensive. Known infiltration routes to South Vietnam were monitored for the movement of logistics and submitted through intelligence channels. Forensic analysis of the information collected before the offensive shows a significant increase of tonnage in transit to the south.⁵⁹ In the absence of enemy action and specific information regarding the actual numbers of enemy troop strength, logistics provides one of the best means to determine the capabilities of an enemy force.

The Impact

January 31, 1968, the recognized date of the commencement of the Tet Offensive, serves as the date that the United States' involvement in Vietnam transitioned from a perceived position of relative advantage, to a controlled withdrawal that lasted another

⁵⁹ John R. Johnson, Richard P. Joyce, Paul C. Nagle, Aristotelis D. Stathacopoulos, Roswell B. Wing, and James L. Jones, "Analysis of Tactical Intelligence Experience in Southeast Asia" (Defense Advanced Research Project, Mclean, VA, 1974), C-4.

six years. The significance of the Tet Offensive was that it became the undeniable counterpoint to the claims of military success put forward by the civilian and military leaders prosecuting the war.

The extent of what was known by the United States military and the South Vietnamese Army leadership will likely never be fully understood. Certainly, information existed that indicated the People's Army of Vietnam and the VC were planning a significant campaign. The failure on the part of United States Forces and its allies was not the failure to predict the upcoming offensive, but to accurately predict the scope and intent. Certainly if senior officials had approached the problem with an open mind, they would have been able to at least acknowledge the possibility that the enemy that was larger than was previously thought and it would seem prudent to reconsider the enemy's possible course of action within the context of a significantly larger size force. MACV must have been cognizant of the possibility, because they cancelled R and R and placed US forces on a higher level of readiness. Since the Communists had launched offensives at a similar time in the previous years, it should have been expected.

However, considering the mixture of messages emanating from MACV, it seems unlikely an effective counter action could be coordinated without a consensus on enemy intent. Had they acknowledged the possibility of a large scale offensive, the damage done could have been significantly mitigated. Perhaps the American public, if informed of the possibility, may have been more understanding of the challenges faced by both the civilian and military leadership, if a more realistic assessment was put forth. The primary obstacle faced by introducing a new assessment to the American public was the previous assessments and the unrealistic expectations that the positive reports generated. As the

MACV J2 became operational and provided more accurate and timely assessments, the order of battle was certain to change. The problem facing military leaders and policy makers was the timing of new capabilities and the maturing of the systems that General McChristian initiated. The brief window between the Ritz and Corral programs becoming operational and the commencement of the Tet Offensive left policy makers little time to adjust to the new figures. As a result, they were left with the decision to support the new order of battle strength or to adopt the new figures and reconsider their perceptions of the enemy's capability.

President Johnson's National Security Advisor, Walt Rostow, acknowledged that the revised figures representing the Communist order of battle were available to the White House, "I don't even remember what was decided upon. But I do remember the debate. I remember the President was fully informed on it."⁶⁰ The President "did understand that . . . there was a debate and it was a debate essentially about whether they had under-estimated in the past the scale of that category . . . that you just described to me. . . . It was not a debate as to whether there had been a recent increase . . . in that category."⁶¹

Additionally, the following cable from the US Ambassador to Walt Rostow highlights both the significance of the change in the figures, but alludes to the potential issues of making such a significant amendment to the order of battle:

⁶⁰ General William C. Westmoreland's Memorandum of Law in Opposition to Defendant CBS's Motion to Dismiss and For Summary Judgment, 20 July 1984, Folder 35, Box 12, Glenn Helm Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Record Number 284412, accessed 18 November 2014, <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=1071235001>, JX 14, 63.

⁶¹ Ibid., JX 14, 78.

AMB BUNKER SAIGON

THE WHITE HOUSE, EYES ONLY WALT ROSTOW

Bob Komer and I wish to bring to your attention potentially serious problem created by new NIE now on verge of completion.

Despite thorough re-analysis by now massive MACV intelligence machine which has brought MACV position much closer to that of CIA, the latter's experts appear insistent on bringing out an estimate which will make enemy strength 430-490,000 instead of the range centering on 298,000 developed by MACV.⁶²

The National Intelligence Estimate (or NIE), referenced by the Ambassador is the CIA's contribution to the intelligence estimate in South Vietnam. It is interesting to note that the Ambassador Bunker identifies the correlation between the MACV "intelligence machine" and the increase in enemy strength numbers. There is a subtle implication that the newest figures are more accurate now that the MACV is fully operational, and while not specifically referenced in the cable, the adjustments to MACV's assessment are likely the result of the incorporation of the Corral and Ritz. The Ambassador further elaborated on the CIA's methodology:

CIA does this chiefly by adding to strength figures some 125,000 so-called self-defense and secret self-defense forces, which are not organized military units at all but rather a shadowy, mostly unarmed part-time hamlet defense element of women, children, and old men on which we have very little evidence and which is so inconsequential and rarely encountered by us as not to warrant inclusion in enemy strength. In last analysis only armed men plus structure controlling and supporting them should validly be included.⁶³

The Ambassador's opinion on the new figures is characterized by the term "inconsequential" and he is openly skeptical of including the political and support number in the order of battle. Interestingly, the Ambassador does not imply the figures

⁶² Ibid., 61.

⁶³ Ibid.

are inflated, rather he considers them ill-defined. The Ambassador acknowledges the considerable variation but considering when the Ambassador is sending this cable on 29 August 1967, five months prior to the Tet Offensive and approximately two months after MACV completed its build-up and began refining the order of battle, this leaves a very short window for key policy makers to become comfortable with the new figures.

I need hardly mention the devastating impact if it should leak out (as these things so often do) that despite all our success in grinding down VC/NVA here, CIA figures are used to show that they are really much stronger than ever. Despite all caveats, this is inevitable conclusion which most of press would reach.⁶⁴

The quote above accurately characterizes the challenges facing both the intelligence personnel and the policy makers. While there were positive developments in the analysis process, the new information produced was contradictory to the assessments provided a few months earlier, by the very intelligence organizations that are now presenting significantly inflated numbers. However, as the Ambassador points out, the easiest correlation for a uniformed reader to make is that despite military success against the communist forces, they have actually become stronger. By changing the metrics, the new order of battle gave the appearance that communist forces can grow at rates faster than US and allied forces can defeat them.

Westy has gone back hard at Buss Wheeler on this and I intend to mention it to the President in my coming weekly. The credibility gap created would be enormous, and is quite consistent with all the hard evidence we have about growing enemy losses, declining VC recruiting and the like.⁶⁵

In conclusion, the Ambassador left little room for doubt about potential issues the conflicting reports generated. In the context of the recent statements made by General

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 61 (JX 896, Bunker 8/29/67 cable to Walt Rostow).

Westmoreland concerning the progress made during the previous year, the perception of an enemy force that was growing in size and capability may have eroded the credibility of both the military and civilian leadership.

An excellent example of the prevailing evaluation of the situation in Vietnam is the year-end assessment provided by General Westmoreland himself. It described the accomplishments of the allies for the year 1967 and the impacts which they had on the communist forces in South Vietnam from the perspective of the Commander of MACV. The assessment provided a much more optimistic depiction of the situation in the period immediately preceding the Tet Offensive:

During 1967, the enemy lost control of large sectors of the population. He faces significant problems in the areas of indigenous recruiting, morale, health, and resource control. Voids in VC ranks are being filled by regular NVA.

Taken at face value, the implication of this statement is that the capability of the communists in South Vietnam is diminishing, and by implication their capacity to execute operations. With their resources being depleted, the expectation was that attacks would occur with lessening frequency and size. There are certain aspects of General Westmoreland's assessment that may have had supporting indicators. In preparation for the upcoming offensive, the communists may very well have shifted their resources and held others in reserve, so it is possible that given the information available to intelligence analysts through the collections process led to this conclusion.

The assessment continued, providing a further description of the assessed impacts suffered by the communist forces:

In many areas the enemy has been driven away from the population center; in others he has been compelled to disperse and evade contact, thus nullifying much of his potential. The year ended with the enemy increasingly resorting to desperation tactics in attempting to achieve military/psychological

victory and he has experienced only failure in these attempts. Enemy bases, with sparse exception are no longer safe havens and he has necessarily become increasingly reliant on Cambodian and Laotian sanctuaries.⁶⁶

In retrospect, it is apparent that nearly all of information put forth in General Westmoreland's assessments was mistaken. In fact, at the time of its submission communist forces were in the final phases of their preparation.

In addition to his assessment of the impact allied efforts were having on the enemy, the commander of MACV offers the following assessment of the friendly situation, specifically the intelligence collection improvements made to the intelligence systems supporting the effort in Vietnam:

A greatly improved intelligence system frequently enables us to concentrate our superior military assets in preempting enemy military initiatives in leading us to decisive accomplishments in conventional engagements.⁶⁷

The report above was delivered mere days before the Tet offensive commenced. General Westmoreland's comments lead to the third intelligence task identified by Wirtz, the dissemination of the assessment to the appropriate parties in order to provide advance warning of a pending enemy action. Certainly, General Westmoreland had access to the conflicting information that was concurrently being circulated by the CIA and MACV intelligence officers and analysts, however there is no mention of even the possibility of a large-scale offensive.

An example of the effect the divergent information was demonstrated during a meeting held in the White House of February 9, 1968. Clark Clifford, whose selection for

⁶⁶ Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force, *Ground Strategy and Force Deployments*, vol. 3, National Archives, accessed 3 September 2014, <http://media.nara.gov/research/pentagon-papers/Pentagon-Papers-Part-IV-C-6-c.pdf>, 2.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Secretary of Defense had been announced on January 19, 1968 makes the following statement:

There is a very strange contradiction in what we are saying and doing.

On one hand, we are saying we have known of this build up. We know the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong launched this type of effort in the cities. We have publicly told the American people that the communist offensive was: (a) not a victory. (b) produced no uprising among the Vietnamese in support of the enemy, and (c) cost the enemy between 20,000 and 25,000 of his combat troops.

Now our reaction to all of this is to say that the situation is more dangerous than it was before all of this. We are saying we need more troops, that we need more ammunition and that we need to call up the reserves.⁶⁸

Clifford's comments capture the dilemma of both the civilian and military leadership in reconciling the significant disparity between the accepted assessments and reality. Nine days after the Tet Offensive Commenced, the key leadership overseeing the war effort openly acknowledged indicators were both present and available, but that they were caught off guard by both the size and scope of the communist offensive.

According to a CIA document distributed on February 15, 1968, titled *The Intelligence Background of the Current Communist Offensive* attempts to describe the information that was available through the agency's distribution channels. Declassified in 2007, the document states that daily intelligence reports were widely distributed throughout the government that accurately predicted Communist forces intended to

⁶⁸ Notes From Meetings, 9-20 February 1968, Folder 6, Box 12, Larry Berman Collection (Presidential Archives Research), The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Record Number 159828, accessed 18 November 2014, <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=0241206084>.

launch “a major and widespread offensive in connection with the Tet lunar new year season.”⁶⁹

The document continues by describing anticipated enemy targets to include the provinces around Saigon, and enemy strikes against Hue and Pleiku. According to the intelligence report, these warning were apparently delivered via the daily and weekly intelligence publications distributed by the CIA. The report describes the increasing intensity in the days leading up to the offensive:

By 20 January, we were stating that Communist forces in the northern 1st Corps area “may intend to carry out simultaneous attacks against both the Khe Sahn area and population centers along the coast.” We noted that at least five North Vietnamese regiments in position to conduct attacks near the coast. On 24 January, we described the expansion of the threat into the Quang Nam-Quang Tin province area where the positioning of Communist units “has increased the threat to other allied positions ranging from Da Nang to Tan Ny. “By 26 January, we reported that a “widespread offensive by enemy forces throughout the northern part of South Vietnam appears imminent.”⁷⁰

Clearly, from the CIA’s perspective, they had provided significant information regarding the enemy’s action. Also of significance, the author points out that the US military publications of the same period issued similar warnings. The question remains, if such accurate intelligence was available to policy makers and military leaders, why were they ignored.⁷¹

⁶⁹ *The Intelligence Background of the Current Communist Offensive*, Intelligence Report, February 15, 1968, National Security Agency: Organization and Operations, 1945-2009, Digital National Security Archive, accessed 9 June 2014, http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnas&rft_dat=xri:dnas:article:CHN01592.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

The document concludes by addressing the intent of the Communist forces, specifically the desire to create an uprising amongst the South Vietnamese. The author of the document describes the information available regarding the political objectives of the Communists as “ambiguous” and “contradictory” and would not provide an accurate guide in determining future enemy courses of action.⁷²

If the aforementioned documents are accurate, not only did the United States and its allies have accurate information regarding the upcoming offensive with relatively accurate details, but that the necessary information was available to both the military leadership at MACV and civilian leadership in Washington, DC for some several months. However, the question remains, with information available that may have proved invaluable in countering the communist offensive, why did seasoned military commanders and civilian leaders choose to overlook and disregard such critical information.

One of the likely reasons for the desire to ignore the less optimistic reports being generated by intelligence analysts is the fact that public support for the war was essential for continued commitment. Leaders in both Washington and South Vietnam had worked hard to demonstrate that their costly efforts were being rewarded with progress against the Communists. President Johnson, acutely aware of waning public support requested in November of 1967 that General Westmoreland return to the United States in order to reassure the American people.⁷³

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ James H. Willbanks, *Tet Offensive: A Concise History* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2006), 7.

The plan was for General Westmoreland to present evidence of significant progress on order to counter the negative information that was flowing out of South Vietnam through the media. A short three months prior to the Tet Offensive, General Westmoreland delivered a very optimistic assessment of the situation in Vietnam even proposing that the role of the US could begin shrinking in as little as two years.⁷⁴

Given the optimistic characterization by General Westmoreland, it is easy to see why it was a challenge for intelligence officers and analysts to aggressively put forth information that contrasted so sharply with the statements made by their commander. However, considering the impact of failing to recognize the developing crisis, it seems extremely unlikely General Westmoreland would intentionally disregard information unless he had reason to doubt the credibility of the information.

The often-repeated phrase, “The enemy gets a vote” is an important component of the analysis of the Tet Offensive. Regardless of the final result of the Communist’s efforts, the planning and execution of the offensive was carried out with great operational secrecy. Despite the large scale of the operation, they managed to maintain secrecy. An early reaction to the offensive by the Australian Ambassador, which was later given to President Johnson by Walt Rostow, describes that activity over the previous weeks as likely in line with the doctrinal guidance that General Giap provided to the communist forces, and that the reasons for the surprise was the excellent operational secrecy.⁷⁵ The

⁷⁴ Ibid., 8.

⁷⁵ W. W. Rostow to President Lyndon B. Johnson; Evaluation of the Tet Offensive, 8 February 1968, Folder 29, Box 2, Veteran Members of the 109th Quartermaster Company (Air Delivery) Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Record Number 58636, accessed 30 November 2014, <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=0010229004>.

Communist forces were acutely aware that surprise was an essential element of their plan and must have employed significant measures to ensure secrecy. According to the memorandum:

The fact that it was kept secret points to the devotion of all those who took part in it, not a word of it seems to have leaked. In II, III and IV Corps, enemy dispositions did not indicate that a major attack on a widespread scale was imminent, and the timing—for the Tet truce which the enemy had said they would observe for seven days—was perfect.⁷⁶

The Australian officials were quick to appreciate the impact secrecy had on the effectiveness of the Tet Offensive. While certain aspects of the can certainly be attributed to the miscalculation of the enemy order of battle at MACV, the Communist's deception efforts certainly played a significant role.

The interrogation of a captured VC prisoner in Da Nang from a CIA report on February 20, 1968 provides an insightful summary of the Communist strategy. In the context of the ongoing offensive, the detainee provided unique insight into the role deception plays in the Communist plan:

General Vo Nguyen Giap revised the new strategy, which was to be carried out in three phases, with the ultimate aim of forcing the Government of Vietnam to accept a coalition government with the National Liberation Front. Phase 1 called for a general offensive against the cities. If this failed, Viet Cong troops during Phase 2 would besiege the cities and, at the same time, lure U. S. troops into the Khe Sanh area.⁷⁷

While the full details of the Communist intent were not yet apparent to intelligence officials, the events taking place certainly supported the idea that the countrywide

⁷⁶ Ibid., 2.

⁷⁷ Text of a CIA report, Subject: Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Tactics and Strategy for the Tet General Offensive, Tuesday, 20 February 1968, accessed 10 October 2014, <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/history/johnson/65vn-4.htm>.

offensive was part of the Phase 1 plan, and that the ongoing operations in and around Khe Sahn were also part of the Communists efforts to deceive the United States into employing a disproportionate number of forces into the area.

In a further example of the incorporation of deception into the Communist strategy was to create the perception that the VC forces were becoming weaker, when in fact they were steadily infiltrating forces and material into South Vietnam. From the same report states that, Ho Phuoc, a political officer, provided information regarding the Communists efforts to mislead the intelligence assessment:

During 1967, the Viet Cong acted as though they were weakening in order to mislead the Government of Vietnam and its allies. In reality, 'men and weapons were moved in South Vietnam in considerable quantity.' The Viet Cong anticipated that the U. S. would increase its strength in South Vietnam during the summer of 1968 and they wanted to increase their own strength first.⁷⁸

In summary, the miscalculations on the part of intelligence organizations were not simply the product of US actions or inactions. The Communist forces enhanced the challenges of intelligence organizations through direct efforts to provide misleading indicators and the practice of strict operational security. The effect of an enemy force's efforts to deceive and to hide information from their adversary's intelligence organizations cannot be overstated.

The expansion in both size and capability of the MACV during the period of 1967 to 1968 is significant. From its origins as a small organization designed to mentor the South Vietnamese, to the evolution into the intelligence organization that existed at the beginning of the Tet Offensive is an indication of the value placed upon timely and accurate intelligence by the Commander of MACV and the leadership in Washington,

⁷⁸ Ibid.

DC. Yet, despite the capabilities of the MACV, the Tet Offensive was still a surprise to both the GVN and US Forces. As characterized in the following quote from the MACV Command History for 1968:

Past experience had indicated the probable violation of the truce set by the enemy and all of RVNAT and the Free World Allies expected his use of the truce to build up his logistics base for future operations. GVN and RVNAF authorities had also expected that the enemy would launch an attack either before or during the Tet holiday season: consequently, rehearsals and coordination of defense plans were accomplished during January. However, despite the many intelligence indications of a major offensive, including the possibility of a significant assault on urban areas, the magnitude of the attack came as a surprise. One reason, of course, was that any major attack on the cities represented a completely new departure from past enemy strategy.⁷⁹

The official history of MACV states that the indications of the Tet Offensive were present. The reason presented for the failure is a change in Communist strategy.⁸⁰

However, the goal of an intelligence organization should be to determine a significant change in the enemy strategy. The Command History fails to address the many factors surrounding the intelligence estimate, specifically the challenges of convincing senior leaders that a change in strategy has occurred.

The circumstances US forces faced in Vietnam were extremely challenging. The dynamic environment both in Vietnam and in the United States resulted in a multitude of factors that challenged policy makers, military leaders, and intelligence personnel. The changing role of the US military in South Vietnam required constant re-evaluation of

⁷⁹ Commander, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. Command History Volume II 1968 (Sanitized), (Saigon, Vietnam: Military History Branch, Office of the Secretary, Joint Staff Headquarters, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, 1968), accessed 9 June 2014, <http://www.dtic.mil/get-tr-doc/pdf?AD=ADA955145>, 881.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

resources and requirements. The political environment in the United States created conditions where the margin for error for all the participants was reduced, and we faced a tenacious enemy that was fully aware of how to exploit any weakness, politically or militarily.

One of the most significant factors in evaluating the failure to provide adequate warning is the period of growth that the MACV underwent in the period leading up to the offensive. Producing accurate and timely intelligence assessments is an extremely difficult process under the best circumstances. However, when leaders make decisions based upon the information they are provided by intelligence organizations, there is an inherent responsibility for the outcome. Regardless of the circumstances, the intelligence organizations that provided the information must share a portion of the blame.

However, in the case of the Tet Offensive, the MACV provided key information that could have led to a more cautious approach on the part of the civilian and military leadership. But providing the information is only a portion of the task, the information needs to be provided in time to alter the course of action. In the case of the Tet Offensive, the time constraint was not necessarily the communist forces initiating the offensive, although this was certainly a factor. Another and perhaps equally important timeline that must be considered is the time it takes for the new information to be accepted, particularly when it significantly differs from previously accepted information.

CHAPTER 3

IRAQ

The Iraqi experience is one that is very fresh in the minds of Americans and the results of our actions there will only be realized many years from the writing of this thesis. Perhaps the most prominent failure associated with poor intelligence is the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and the lack of concrete proof of their existence after playing such a prominent role in the case to go to war against the country of Iraq.

However, the intelligence failure that continues to affect us today is the failure to anticipate the insurgency that developed within several months in Iraq following the invasion. The insurgency grew from relatively small groups in 2004, into country-wide civil war in 2006 occurring on the preexisting fault lines between Iraq's two largest religious sects.

As previously mentioned, prewar intelligence was primarily concerned with the presence of WMDs. The justification for the invasion of Iraq hinged on the supposition that Saddam Hussein possessed WMDs, and that in his hand these weapons presented an unacceptable risk to the United States. Therefore, regime change coupled with securing the WMDs was necessary.

In his remarks on January 31, 2003, President George W. Bush made the following state regarding Saddam Hussein's WMDs: "Secretary Powell will make a strong case about the danger of an armed Saddam Hussein. He will make it clear that Saddam Hussein is fooling the world, or trying to fool the world. He will make it clear that Saddam is a menace to peace in his own neighborhood." With this statement and

others like it, the President set the United States and a coalition of nations on the path to remove both Saddam Hussein from power and secure the weapons in his possession.

The purpose of this discussion is not to support or detract from the justification to invade Iraq. Rather to address the focus of intelligence on the presence of the WMDs and the destruction of Saddam Hussein's conventional forces. Both of which drifted from the forefront, as an insurgency grew which eventually engulfed the entire country.

The insurgency began as a series of seemingly unconnected events across the country. Increased attacks against coalition forces in the Sunni Triangle, and sporadic violence in Baghdad and Mosul would increase in number for the next three years. As attacks increased across the country, the idea of a persistent insurgency began to take hold in the media and amongst the service members on the ground.

Invasion Forces and Initial Intelligence Resources

The role of intelligence in counterinsurgency differs significantly from that of a conventional conflict. In a conventional operation, the intelligence effort supports the operation that a commander has decided. This usually happens in the form of information requirements associated with a particular objective.⁸¹ Military intelligence organizations generally execute this task well. Military intelligence systems have the systems and the structure to collect and make assessments on conventional enemies.⁸²

Insurgencies generally present a much more challenging problem for intelligence organizations. Unlike conventional forces, insurgencies generally lack the formal

⁸¹ Walter L. Perry and John Gordon IV, *Analytic Support to Intelligence in Counterinsurgencies* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008), xiv.

⁸² Ibid.

structure and behaviors of a conventional enemy and do not exhibit the same characteristics of a conventional force until they become large.⁸³

The intelligence organizations that were part of the invasion of Iraq were designed to support commanders in a conventional conflict. In 2003, the intelligence capabilities of a maneuver brigade were a multi-disciplined military intelligence company that was not an organic asset. Other than the S-2 staff section at the battalion and brigade levels, minimal capability existed to effectively process the complexity required to combat or in some cases identify the existence of an insurgent network.⁸⁴

The situation that the United States and Coalition forces expected to find in Iraq was a security environment that could be controlled by a police force.⁸⁵ The problems that planners expected US forces to face were reconstruction and the process of establishing a functional government after removing the Baathist Party from power. As the authors of *Assessing Iraq's Sunni Arab Insurgency*, Michael Eisenstadt and Jeffrey White point out: "Because of insufficient Coalition intelligence and forces, the insurgents were relatively unfettered from the outset, allowing the insurgency to gather momentum quickly."⁸⁶

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Andrew Rathmell, Olga Oliker, Terrence K. Kelly, David Brannan, and Keith Crane, *Developing Iraq's Security Sector: The Coalition Provisional Authority's Experience* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2005).

⁸⁶ Michael Eisenstadt and Jeffrey White, "Assessing Iraq's Sunni Arab Insurgency," *Military Review* 86, no. 3 (May/June 2006): 33-51.

From the beginning, the planners of Operation Iraqi Freedom envisioned a different conflict than what actually occurred. An argument can be made that the United States began operations with too few forces in general. However, the capabilities that were most in demand were the intelligence functions required by both commanders on the ground in Iraq and policy makers in Washington, DC.

In examining the 2004 Iraq insurgency, there is no analysis regarding the development of a large intelligence organization that played such a large role in the Tet Offensive. Rather, the intelligence capabilities in a unit's Table of Organization and Equipment were the only resources readily available. As previously mentioned, military intelligence organizations are effective against conventional adversaries. They are designed and organized to serve that purpose.

However, when conducting counter insurgency operations, the organization, equipment, and personnel may not be ideal. In a 2008 Rand Report, *Counterinsurgency in Iraq (2003-2006)*, Bruce R. Pirnie and Edward O'Connell addresses the inadequacy of the conventional military organizations:

Conventional U.S. forces may be overwhelmingly superior to the insurgents with regard to traditional combat, but an Iraqi landscape highlighted by suicide and roadside bombings, assassinations, and beheadings is far from traditional combat. During the first two years of the war, U.S. forces repeatedly entered cities in the Sunni Triangle to engage the insurgents. They prevailed in most *traditional* tactical engagements, but the insurgency continued unabated because the insurgents continued to regenerate and replace their losses from within Iraq and outside Iraq.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Bruce R. Pirnie and Edward O'Connell, *Counterinsurgency in Iraq (2003-2006)* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, National Defense Research Institute, 2008), 36.

The US military lacked some of the key resources needed to effectively understand the insurgents they were fighting. Intelligence resources, such as linguists and cultural experts, lacked an effective method of properly understanding the key elements of how the insurgent operated, the strength of insurgent organizations and how insurgent leaders commanded and controlled their forces.

In April of 2003 the US Army had a significant number of intelligence assets available for its use in Iraq. Under the control of Central Command and V Corps, was the 205th MI Brigade.⁸⁸ The 205th MI Brigade, as seen in figure 4, also included a significant number of attachments from US Army Reserve and National Guard units.

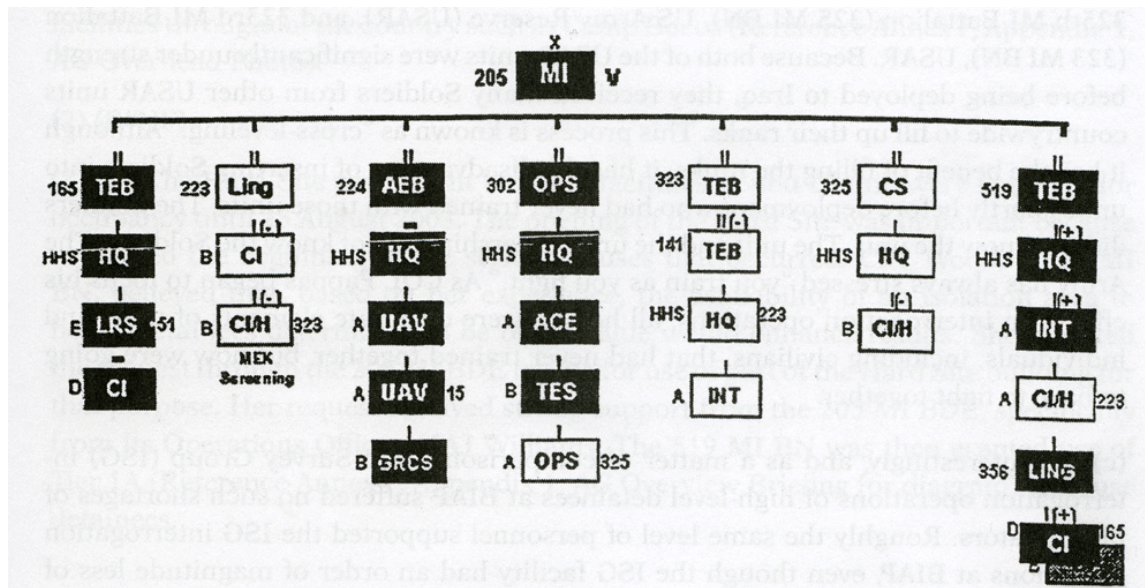


Figure 4. 205th MI Brigade Task Organization, August 2003

Source: Fay, AR 15-6 Investigation of the Abu Ghraib Detention Facility.

⁸⁸ Dr. Donald P. Wright and Colonel Timothy R. Reese with the Contemporary Operations Study Team, *On Point II: Transition to the New Campaign* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, June 2008), 194.

In addition to the 205th MI Brigade under V Corps, the Combined Component Land Forces Command had the 513th MI Battalion. The US Army also had significant resources from the Intelligence Support Command and national intelligence resources.⁸⁹ The composition of the intelligence organizations supporting United States efforts in Iraq was built around the conventional mission of defeating the Iraqi military. While there were certainly assets capable of providing intelligence support in a counter-insurgency operation, a significant portion of their effectiveness eroded when enemy forces no longer presented the same patterns and indicators of a conventional force.

Post Invasion Intelligence, Resources, and Structure

However, in May of 2004, changes in the command structure of US forces in Iraq resulted in a significant reduction of intelligence assets in Iraq. CENTCOM and the Combined Component Land Forces Command moved from Iraq to Kuwait, taking intelligence resources with them. The organization that was left to control operations in Iraq was the Combined Joint Task Force 7, with V Corps as the senior staff element.⁹⁰ As stated by senior intelligence officer, Major General Barbara Fast, “When CFLCC departed, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) HUMINT and US Army Intelligence and Security Command (INSCOM) assets departed, as well.”⁹¹ A decision that further

⁸⁹ Wright and Reese, 192.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 193.

⁹¹ Major General Barbara Fast, interview by Contemporary Operations Study Team, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 27 March 2006, in *On Point II: Transition to the New Campaign*, ed. Dr. Donald P. Wright and Colonel Timothy R. Reese with the Contemporary Operations Study Team (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, June 2008), 193.

exacerbated the problem of understanding the developing situation in Iraq was that the task of some of the most capable HUMINT collection resources, from the Defense Intelligence Agency, were focused on finding WMDs as part of the Iraq Survey Group.⁹² The result was a vacuum in both experience and capability. As the insurgency developed in Iraq over the summer of 2003, the need for additional intelligence assets, particularly HUMINT intelligence grew.

While the departure of intelligence resources from Iraq certainly had an impact on the intelligence collection and analysis capability, other developments began that would enhance the situational understating of US Forces in Iraq. In 2003, General Fast began organizing a fusion cell that consolidated intelligence across Iraq. The fusion cell brought together national level organizations, military organizations from across Combined Joint Task Force 7 and special operations units in Iraq. In October of 2003, the Combined Joint Task Force 7 fusion cell was a robust organization that brought the resources of several organizations together in a collaborative environment that benefitted forces across the full spectrum of operations across Iraq.⁹³

However, as the US forces in Iraq continued to develop and refine their intelligence processes and capabilities, the insurgency in Iraq continued to progress. In October 2003, insurgent activity grew, culminating in several bombings across the country. Insurgent activity increased to 50 attacks per day and the United States responded with operations that included the use of air power. In response to the increasing pressure of US combat forces, the insurgent activity waned to 18 per day.

⁹² Wright and Reese, 193.

⁹³ Ibid.. 195.

However, as the attacks declined during the winter of 2003 and spring of 2004, the insurgency was continuing to develop. As explained by Colonel Jabbar Naeemah Karam, “This was actually a period of reorganization during which the terrorists once again studied new U.S. tactics and planned a renewed offensive. An organized Sunni insurgency, deeply rooted in salafist ideology and motivated as well by nationalism was definitely becoming more distinct.”⁹⁴

As the insurgency continued to develop and levels of violence continued to rise, the intelligence effort in Iraq struggled to keep pace. The window of opportunity to understand and effectively combat the insurgency was rapidly diminishing. While the number of attacks was diminishing, the effectiveness of the attacks was increasing. Over roughly the same time period, the number of attacks causing coalition fatalities increased by 41 percent.⁹⁵

The insurgency continued to grow and the United States was not able to catch up. Insurgent bombings, the Abu Garaib scandal, and a multitude of other factors fueled the smoldering insurgency. The events culminated in what was considered the second battle of Fallujah. Four US security contractors entered the city of Fallujah on March 31, 2004. The Commander of Combined Joint Task Force 7, Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez ordered the execution of Operation Vigilant Resolve. The result was an abortive attempt to capture the perpetrators and an increased level of violence across the Sunni Triangle

⁹⁴ Jabbar Karam, “Post-Transition Violence in Iraq (2004-2005): The Military Perspective of an Insider” (Research Project, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 2006), 2.

⁹⁵ Bruce Hoffman, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2004), 14.

and would give the insurgents an important base from which they could stage operations throughout Iraq.

While it impossible to say with certainty that improved awareness gained through a more accurate intelligence picture would have allowed better decision making or more effective prosecuting of the insurgency. What is apparent is the lack of foresight to ensure an intelligence architecture was in place that allowed senior military leadership to make informed decisions and accurate assessments regarding the situation in post-invasion Iraq.

The Influence and Perspectives of Senior Leadership

One of the most contentious aspects of the Iraq conflict is the justification for the initial invasion in 2003. A discussion of this subject alone would be lengthy and detailed. However, it is important to address the influence of superior leaders on the intelligence process that was occurring on the ground in Iraq.

The failure to locate WMDs presented policy makers in Washington, DC with a unique problem. Without clear evidence that Saddam Hussein possessed WMDs the purpose of the invading force became questionable. As mentioned previously, key intelligence resources were tasked with locating WMDs during a critical time period.⁹⁶ While the search for WMDs continued, the mission of US forces transitioned from an invasion force to that of nation builders and counter insurgents. As of April 2004, senior

⁹⁶ Wright and Reese, 193.

policy makers acknowledged that a successful transition was essential, but still continued to maintain the possibility that WMDs were found.⁹⁷

Even as US forces faced increasing violence in Iraq, the message that was communicated to the American public and the world was one of optimism and significance. In his remarks at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld made the following statement:

Later this month, our multinational coalition will hand over power to the newly announced interim Iraqi government. The rise of a free and-governing Iraq will deny terrorists a base of operation, discredit their violent ideology, and may well provide more momentum for reformers across the region. Success in Iraq will be a victory for the security of the civilized world.⁹⁸

The implication of Secretary Rumsfeld comments was that once the government of Iraq transitions from the Coalition Provisional Authority, the actions of the US Government will have been justified because the new Iraq government will have a significant victory in the larger Global War on Terror.

An excellent example of the message being conveyed by leaders in Washington, DC are the comments made by the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Douglas J. Feith, The American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research:

There has been great interest in whether the fighting in Fallujah represents a widespread insurgency. It is not one now. Coalition forces, Iraqi authorities and the Coalition Provisional Authority are working with Sunni tribal and other leaders to try to ensure that it does not become a broad-based attack that could

⁹⁷ Douglas J. Feith, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, “U.S. Strategy for the War on Terrorism” (Political Union University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, April 14, 2004), accessed 30 September 2014, <http://www.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=108>.

⁹⁸ Donald H. Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense, “Remarks at the International Institute for Strategic Studies” (Singapore, June 5, 2004), accessed 28 September 2014, <http://www.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=128>.

threaten the progress country-wide toward Iraqi self-rule. They are working to prevent the other major Sunni cities from erupting in sympathy with Fallujah.

In the Shi'a community, Moqtada al Sadr's power grab has not succeeded. According to all reports, support for him continues to decrease as the major Shi'a religious figures influence their community against him. Our desire to avoid fighting in the Shi'a holy city of Najaf has given Sadr something of a sanctuary for the moment, but the Shi'a community continues to pressure him to agree to a peaceful resolution of the situation.

So neither Sadr nor the Fallujah anti-coalition fighters represent a broad movement or insurgency in Iraq. Unlike in other historical guerrilla or terror campaigns, hardly any bombings in Iraq have been accompanied by a claim of responsibility. The Ba'athists and terrorists behind the bombings know that they have no philosophical or political basis on which to appeal to the Iraqi people.⁹⁹

Under Secretary Feith's characterization of the events in Iraq presented the world with an extremely optimistic assessment that was eventually proven false. Despite continuing and escalating violence across Iraq, Under Secretary Feith flatly states that there is no insurgency in Iraq. Both the violence occurring in Fallujah and the developing conflict with Moqtada al Sadr and his Shia militias are presented as brief and insignificant incidents that are rapidly being brought under control. Interestingly, the Undersecretary uses the lack of any particular group claiming responsibility for an attack as evidence against a growing insurgency. The overall message is one of confidence and progress of a mission that is closer to the end than the beginning.

It is important to consider the impact that statements such as this would have on the information that was communicated by intelligence personnel in Iraq. Certainly intelligence personnel at some level must have known that the violence occurring across

⁹⁹ Douglas J. Feith, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, "Iraq: One Year Later" (The American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, Washington, DC, 4 May 2004), accessed 28 September 2014, <http://www.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=115>.

Iraq was significant. However, in the context of the environment at the time, as demonstrated by the previously discussed comments from senior government officials, it must have been very difficult to present an assessment that deviated from the more optimistic reports.

By July of 2004, intelligence analysts were acknowledging that the insurgency had grown to 20,000 fighters.¹⁰⁰ This was a significant departure from the description that had been communicated over the previous months. By the end of 2004, it was impossible to deny the existence of the insurgency and their capability to inflict harm on both the Coalition Forces and the Iraqi people. On the floor of the House of Representatives the scope and capability is described by Representative Lynn C.

Woolsey:

Let us not forget that more than 1,200 American soldiers have been killed in Iraq. Over 9,000 have been wounded, and an estimated 16,000 Iraqi civilians have been killed as a result of this war. In fact, 16,000 is probably a very low estimate.

The growing Iraqi insurgency, like the global War on Terror, cannot be won by being stronger than the insurgents. We cannot win this war with guns and bombs, because for every insurgent we kill, three more sign up.¹⁰¹

As 2004 came to a close, the number of casualties, both service members and Iraqis presented undeniable evidence that not only was there an active insurgency, but it was also a very potent and growing force. Woolsey addressed both the fact that the

¹⁰⁰ Steve Negus, *The Insurgency Intensifies*, Middle East Research and Information Project, accessed 10 October 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/155947>, 24.

¹⁰¹ Smart Security and Root Causes of Iraqi Insurgency, 150 Cong Rec H 1092, 6 December 2004, Congress-Session: 108- 2, vol. 150, no. 137, accessed 28 September 2014, <HTTP://congressional.proquest.com.lumen.cgscarl.com/congressional/docview/t17.d18.c460e65e07003109?accountid=28992>.

insurgency exists, and that our methods for combating the insurgency up to that point were likely unsound.¹⁰²

When the United States and Coalition forces entered Iraq in 2003 they were configured for a conventional fight against a conventional enemy that they believed was in possession of WMDs. It is also important to note that a little over ten years had passed since the United States had fought the Iraqis during the Gulf War. Consequently the resources that were brought to the conflict were those that were necessary to defeat the Iraqi Army and locate the suspected WMDs.

When the invasion was accomplished, the primary mission became task of securing Iraq so that authority could transition to an Iraqi led government. The intelligence organizations that remained in Iraq were focused on the security situation. These resources should have been sufficient, and it is difficult to argue that there were not enough intelligence units. Rather, the emergence of an unanticipated threat created conditions that made intelligence assessments challenging regardless of the resources were available. Due to the fact that the Iraq conflict is only in the recent past, many of the intelligence reports of the time remain classified and cannot be considered in this analysis. However, regardless of the reporting during the time by intelligence organizations, the message communicated by senior leaders was almost an exact contradiction of the situation that was developing on the ground in Iraq.

¹⁰² Ibid.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

There are a multitude of factors that led to the surprise on the part of the United States and its allies in January 1968. This thesis has examined several of them. The challenge of determining what, if any, failure on the part of the intelligence organizations was to blame for not providing adequate warning. It also examined the factors associated with the failures, such as outside influences that may have had a negative effect on the intelligence. Finally, were there any conflicting assessments that created confusion and possibly led to an inability to properly respond to warnings?

One element of the shortcoming in the failure to accurately predict the scope and timing of Tet Offensive was the sequence of events leading up to the Communists commencing their actions. The MACV was in a continuous state of development in the years leading up to the Tet Offensive. General McChristian's plan to transform the J-2 into a robust intelligence organization capable of supporting the needs of the increasing US combat forces became fully operational shortly before the Tet Offensive. If the MACV had become operational sooner, it is possible that the expanded capabilities might have provided intelligence leaders, such as General McChristian, the time needed to solidify the assessment and present the conflicting assessments to General Westmoreland and leaders in Washington, DC. There is the possibility that if General Westmoreland could have relayed a more accurate description of the situation in Vietnam, key leaders in Washington, DC and American public would not have been as shocked at the news the war was much further from being as successful as they had been led to believe.

In a meeting on 19 March 1968 among the Democratic Congressional leadership, assumptions and conversations took place that directly placed the blame for the failure to predict Tet on faulty intelligence:

Senator Byrd: I am concerned about:

1. That we had poor intelligence.
2. That we were not prepared for these attacks.
3. We underestimated the morale and vitality of the Viet Cong.
4. We over-estimated the support of the South Vietnamese government and its people.

The President: I don't agree with any of that. We knew that they planned a general uprising around Tet. Our intelligence showed there was a winter-spring offensive planned.¹⁰³

It is important to note that President Johnson defends the intelligence provided on the VC prior to the offensive. However, in examining all four of Senator Byrd's points, the first point, poor intelligence, was the primary element that resulted in the subsequent failures. President Johnson's defense of the intelligence only begs further questions as to why there was a failure to respond to the intelligence. While there may never be a definite answer of why the attack came as a surprise, it is almost indisputable that sufficient information was available to properly prepare United States and allied forces to an extent that they could have been much more prepared for a large offensive during the Tet holiday. In summary, the surprise of the Tet Offensive was not necessarily a surprise to military leaders, intelligence organizations, or the president. Rather, it was a surprise to

¹⁰³ Notes From Democratic Congressional Leadership Meeting, 6 February 1968, Larry Berman Collection (Presidential Archives Research), accessed 18 August 2014, <http://www.virtual.vietnam.ttu.edu/cgi-bin/starfetch.exe?Si6Cg7eD42EJZOdq.K7JRAW.W4qDu3FuBpJE9JKyu9m0L9RiwBHpuVM6AqNnbdb9SfT9W0Lrxd3.LxAH.fCq01Zjo37o2imLDFQnrW@@1II/0241705031.pdf>.

the American people because of the information they had been provided by those individuals in authority.

The Iraq insurgency in 2004 is different from the Tet Offensive in several respects. One of the most significant is that it was the actual development of the insurgence that was either misunderstood or underestimated. It can be argued that the situation in Iraq was more difficult than what the United States faced in Vietnam. In Vietnam there was no question that an active enemy that was opposed us from the start of the war. In Iraq, United States and Coalition forces entered into the conflict with the expectation of fighting a conventional force. The concept of an insurgency was an afterthought and as a result the United States was unprepared to deal with a threat that was unanticipated. In both instances, leadership at the national level, as previously discussed, projected a very optimistic assessment of the situation.¹⁰⁴ While much of the information remains classified, even without the ideal structure and capabilities, the activity and increasing casualties provided indicators that there was clearly an enemy force that was gaining both strength and ability. However, in a manner similar to Vietnam, the rhetoric of senior political and military leaders concluded that anything other than a decisive positive outcome which had the hallmarks of traditional victory would be perceived as a failure for the administration and the military.

While the enemy order of battle in Vietnam was assessed to be less than the actual number of forces that were eventually revealed, the assessment was based upon the best information and analysis available at the time. The intelligence in Vietnam was likely less accurate initially, but developed. Low projections for the enemy order of battle certainly

¹⁰⁴ Feith, "Iraq: One Year Later."

led to an overly optimistic perception of the enemy capabilities. But as the capabilities of the MACV increased, the accuracy improved. According to General McChristian, this updated information was presented to General Westmoreland in advance of Tet. It is possible that General Westmoreland wanted time to confirm the new numbers because of the significant disparity between the two orders of battle. However, it seems more likely that the timing of the new information presented Westmoreland with the most significant challenge, as it would result in a complete reassessment of the war.

Another area in which the two conflicts differ is the that United States and Coalition forces entered into Iraq as an invasion force, rather than incrementally in support of a government, as was the case in Vietnam. Without the benefit of an ally that intimately understood the dynamics of its own country, the United States and Coalition forces were handicapped and limited to their own intelligence resources.

In both Vietnam and Iraq, people and organizations that claim to have made accurate assessments were overlooked or dismissed. One example is the previously discussed CIA Report *The Intelligence Background of the Current Communist Offensive*.¹⁰⁵ However, it is important to acknowledge that this was only one of many reports and like any report; it must be weighed against the entire body of information. To claim that reports such as this predicted the eventual result may be true, but it is only true with the luxury of hindsight. In Iraq, similar classified reporting may have existed, but is not available to general public. Some important considerations from this analysis are

¹⁰⁵ *The Intelligence Background of the Current Communist Offensive*, Intelligence Report, 15 February 1968, National Security Agency: Organization and Operations, 1945-2009, Digital National Security Archive, accessed 9 June 2014, http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnas&rft_dat=xri:dnas:article:CHN01592.

whether the senior officials discouraged the accurate assessments through their public pronouncements, and if these statements had the effect of slanting the intelligence gathering so as to reach an optimistic (and inaccurate) conclusion about enemy strength and intentions, and whether the intelligence organizations on the ground in Iraq were equipped to make accurate assessments. In response to the first point, the extent to which policy maker's public statements influence intelligence is unknown. However, it is important to acknowledge that inaccurate statements based upon intelligence that is not objective creates additional risks.

In armed conflicts, particularly counter-insurgency, information is often ambiguous and challenging to collect. However, as long as conflicts of this nature persist, there will be a need for accurate and timely information. It is imperative that military leaders, policy makers, and intelligence practitioners are aware of the potential risks of engaging in a conflict that requires a significant investment of intelligence resources, and then failing to provide them. Self-deception, willful or otherwise, undermines rather than serves the military and political decision-makers. The evidence indicates that this practice occurred in Tet and again in Iraq, with similarly unfortunate outcomes. Effective intelligence must be free from the biases that inhibit the processes. Only through the critical analysis of each situation and consistent objectivity on the part of military and civilian leaders can intelligence effectively shape events in our favor.

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